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PHILIP J. KLUKOFF

**Smollett and the *Critical Review*:
Criticism of the Novel, 1756-1763.**

Although much of the criticism of the novel in the *Critical Review* took the form of digests and summaries such as those in many of the earlier abstract journals as well as in its contemporary, the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the *Critical Review* writers did show a marked interest in the theory of the novel, and a critical standard revealed itself in the reviews of major novels. In this brief discussion I hope to suggest that Smollett's influence on the criticism of the novel in the *Critical Review* might have been that of establishing a critical context within which the novel could be discussed as a serious aesthetic genre. This is perhaps the most fruitful criterion for discerning his influence on the periodical; it is rooted in his own work and attempts to establish an apparent theoretical relationship between his concept of the novel and its ethical concern and that of the *Critical Review* during the years of his editorship from 1756 to 1763.

In 1756 no less than four fifths of the novels were reviewed by Samuel Derrick, who, it appears, was assigned the task of "trash reader."¹ Smollett, we know, did not review novels in 1756, but rather he concentrated his efforts on historical and scientific documents and wrote the editorial prefaces and remarks. Derrick's reviews are hardly notable; he merely restates the traditional theories of the extravagances of romance and argues for reality and moral efficacy through characters who were "remarkable in life" and "within the compass of our acquaintance."

There is little reason to believe that Smollett would have altered his reviewing policy after Derrick's departure to Bath, where he succeeded Beau Nash as Master of Ceremonies; for certainly until 1759 many of the reviews of novels shared an almost indistinguishable anonymity. It was not until April 1759, with the review of *Rasselas*, that the *Critical Review* clearly began to set down a theory of narrative writing; and in that year Smollett's pen became more prominent in the reviews of novels. It is likely, however, that Smollett reviewed novels out of necessity: he complained to John Wilkes of "reading dull books & writing dull Commentaries" without having time to

¹ Edward S. Noyes, *The Letters of Tobias Smollett* (Cambridge, 1926), p. 46.

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"snatch . . . a momentary Respite."² Yet in the reviews for 1759 we can begin to discern a critical context into which the periodical placed the novel as an organic genre through which the principle of universal benevolence urged men to sympathize with the feelings of others regardless of self-interest and taught the reader simple ethical principles without setting up any intellectual barrier to thwart the right kind of imaginative response to the total effect of the novel.

This context is consistent with the periodical's response to the aesthetics of contemporary psychological critical taste. In reviews of Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Alexander Gerard's *Essay on Taste* (1759), John Armstrong's *Sketches* (1758), John Gilbert Cooper's *Letters Concerning Taste* (1757), and Lord Kames's *Elements of Criticism* (1762) the reviewers or reviewer (in a forthcoming note in *Notes and Queries* I offer evidence for Smollett as the single reviewer of these documents) argues in terms of the principle of sympathy as a foundation for a theory of morals and as a source of judgment, and he considers the comprehensiveness of the imagination as a source of perception and conception, thus affirming the fusion of the innate "moral sense" and "aesthetic sense" as the source of ethical and epistemological awareness. The reviewer of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* comments:

It is sufficient to his [Smith's] purpose, if sympathy, whence ever it proceeds, be allowed to be a principal in human nature, which surely without the greatest obstinacy, cannot be disputed. This spring, this movement, this power, is the chief foundation of his system. By means of it he hopes to explain all the species of approbation or disapprobation, which are excited by human action or behaviour. . . . We may venture to give him the preference above all writers on this subject.³

Two years earlier the reviewer of Edmund Burke's *Enquiry* took issue with the author's premise that sympathy in the misfortunes of others was attended with a degree of delight.

The very meaning of sympathy is fellow-feeling; how then can we suffer the miseries of others, and yet be happy ourselves: The sympathizing mind indeed, may have recourse to comparison, when the sensation becomes too keen, and this will afford relief; but a positive pain still continues. We cannot think that nature excites in any person a sense of pleasure, at feeling the sufferings

² Noyes, p. 61.

³ *Critical Review*, VII (May 1759), 386. Hereafter this periodical will be cited as CR.

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of a fellow creature. We rather shun such spectacles with horror, except when there is something great or astonishing in the event; then we are interested and attracted by curiosity and ambition. The novelty of the occurrence strikes the imagination: we are seized with an instantaneous desire of acquiring a new and great idea: we grow ambitious of signalizing our fortitude and address, where there is an appearance of danger and difficulty; and we become as it were parties to the important scene which is transacting. . . .⁴

The reviewer argued that through sympathetic intuition the imagination can identify itself with an object and spontaneously and vitally perceive the existing reality of that object, and that sympathy carries a pain superior to pleasure, that "misery alone is the cause of misery only."

The reviews of the six documents above reflect the *Critical Review's* apparent acceptance of three basic assumptions of the psychological aesthetic (1) that art is a communication of emotion characterized by its form or design, (2) that associational response is elicited by the formal presentation of ideas familiar through experience, and (3) that through a sympathetic identification achieved imaginatively we can discern the moral and aesthetic union which characterizes the end of art.

These assumptions distinguish the *Critical Review's* attitude toward the novel from that of its contemporaries, the *Monthly Review* and the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the latter of which merely listed new novels in its "Register of Books" or simply summarized the content of the work. The fact that the critical context emphasized internal response provided the rationale by which the novel could be treated as a distinctive aesthetic entity at once socially, morally, and artistically complete. Although the *Monthly Review* acknowledged Smith's moral principles and the aesthetics of Gerard and Kames, it failed to apply their ethical or aesthetic formulas to specific literary problems. The *Monthly Review's* refusal to commit itself beyond generality is reflected in its comments on the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: "The principle of Sympathy, on which he [Smith] founds his system, is an unquestionable principle in human nature; but whether his reasonings upon it are just and satisfactory or not, we shall not take upon us to pronounce. . . ."⁵

Because Smollett was personally and intellectually sympathetic to the movement toward a psychological aesthetic in Scotland, it would

⁴ CR, III (April 1757), 362.

⁵ *Monthly Review*, XXI (July 1759), 2.

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be difficult to imagine that his and the *Critical Review's* affirmative response to that aesthetic was coincidental, since Smollett's dominating personality was an organic part of the *Review's*. Certainly the possible presence of Smollett's pen in reviews of novels between 1759 and 1763 and the reflection of his own ethical and critical preferences in other reviews during those years (and in some earlier reviews) clearly suggest his stature in terms of the general critical tenor of the periodical. Where Smollett echoed Francis Hutcheson's sentiments of universal benevolence based on a community of men whose nature was potentially good, though many times disguised by self-interest, the *Critical Review* also asked the novelist as a "painter" of society not to distort the nature of humanity by representing it in a "false light" but to evoke a sympathy for society and its members through the novel's organic presentation, which at once unified the novel as a work of art and directed the reader's sensibility toward moral awareness through imaginative response.

Smollett himself realized the novel's capability of effectively dramatizing the virtues of an unprejudiced perception of experience and a benevolent approach to human nature which in turn confirmed the possibility of universal happiness. Again, Smollett's few remarks on the novel in his prefaces are notable for their concern with the creative process and the importance of internal response. They reflect his concern for an organic fusion of form and ethic whereby the moral assertion of the novel is effectively directed by a structural intensity governed by the action of the hero. Because of the hero's importance Smollett insists upon a necessary rapport—a sympathetic response or association—between the reader and the hero. It is through this response that the novel's ethical or moral efficacy is wrought.

In the preface to *Roderick Random* Smollett introduces sympathy as a first cause of our ideas of justice and propriety. He argues that literary instruction should awaken our pity for the sufferings of our fellow men, and he outlines the novel's role in communicating an emotional theory of morals:

The reader gratifies his curiosity in perusing the adventures of a person in distress; his indignation is heated against the authors of his calamity; the humane passions are inflamed; the contrast between dejected virtue and insulting vice appears with greater aggravation; and every impression having a double force on the imagination, the memory retains the circumstance, and the heart improves by example. The attention is not tired with a bare catalogue of characters, but agreeably diverted with all the variety of

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invention; and the vicissitudes of life appear in their peculiar circumstances, opening up an ample field for wit and humor.⁶

The similarity of sentiment with that of Adam Smith is revealing:

Our joy for the deliverance of those heroes of tragedy or romance who interest us, is as sincere as our grief for their distress, and our fellow-feeling with their misery is not more real than with their happiness. We enter into their gratitude towards those faithful friends who did not desert them in their difficulties; and we heartily go along with their resentment against those perfidious traitors who injured, abandoned, or deceived them. In every passion of which the mind of man is susceptible, the emotions of the bystander always corresponds to what, by bringing the case home to himself, he imagines should be the sentiments of the sufferer.⁷

In the preface to *Ferdinand Count Fathom* Smollett again fuses the moral sense and aesthetic internal sense as agents in the creative process. The fact that the first sentence uses the analogy of painting and the second the analogy of dramatic plotting suggests that Smollett was concerned not only with the aesthetic gratification in conceiving order or design but also with the response to that order, which in the novel becomes manifest in the response to the hero whose function it is to "unite the incidents, unwind the clue of the labyrinth, and at last close the scene by virtue of his own importance." Smollett continues:

. . . The same principle by which we rejoice at the remuneration of merit, will teach us to relish the disgrace and discomfiture of vice, which is always an example of extensive use and influence, because it leaves a deep impression of terror upon the minds of those who were not confirmed in the pursuit of morality and virtue, and, while the balance wavers, enables the right scale to preponderate. . . .

The impulse of fear, which is the most violent and interesting of all the passions, remains longer than any other upon the memory; and for one that is allured to virtue, by the contemplation of that peace and happiness which it bestows, a hundred are deterred from practice of vice, by that infamy and punishment to which it is liable, from the laws and regulations of mankind.⁸

Smollett may have had in mind a passage from *Peregrine Pickle* in which he wrote that "the imagination naturally magnifies every object that falls under its cognizance, especially those that concern the passions of fear and admiration; and when the occurrence comes to be rehearsed, the vanity of the relater exaggerates every circumstance in order to enhance the importance of the communication."⁹

⁶ The Nottingham Society Edition (New York, 1945), I, xlv.

⁷ *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London, 1875), p. 5.

⁸ Shakespeare Head Edition (Oxford, 1925), I, 4.

⁹ *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle*, ed. James L. Clifford (London, 1964), p. 559.

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Smollett's preface to *Ferdinand Count Fathom* is a crude statement of purpose that is theoretically consistent with, though an inversion of, his earlier preface to *Roderick Random*. But the dictates of the preface never become realized in practice. The length and diffusion of the novel cannot evoke a sustained emotional response, and Smollett's hero is inadequate. Ferdinand is a vaguely conceived personification of active malevolence. He is unreal and thus an unsuccessful vehicle for Smollett's "principle."

When Smollett writes, "I, whose notions of human excellence are not quite so sublime, am apt to believe it is owing to that spirit of self-conceit and contradiction, which is at least as universal, if not as natural, as the moral sense so warmly contended for by those ideal philosophers,"¹⁰ he is affirming the existence of two motives for human conduct. And Smollett's development as a novelist may be traced through his heroes' attempt to balance and counterbalance the inherent, indeed compatible, qualities of self-love and social love as ethical weights in order to estimate the value of meaningful action. His last three novels dramatically illustrate this progression. *Fathom* is a malevolist for whom self-conceit, vanity, and self-gratification motivate action; *Greaves* is the benevolist whose quixotic social concern is incapable of sustaining itself as a successful ethical principle in a vicious and sordid world; it is Matthew Bramble, however, in whom self and social love and spontaneous indignation and active benevolence are inextricably fused, who emerges as the personification of complete ethical awareness. In this context it is not difficult to understand why Smollett reintroduces the repentant *Fathom* in *Humphry Clinker* under the newly assumed name "Grieve" in an obvious play on "Greaves." He is the malevolent become benevolent.

In *Humphry Clinker* Jerry Melford records: "Without all doubt, the greatest advantage acquired in travelling and perusing mankind in the original, is that of dispelling those shameful clouds that darken the faculties of the mind, preventing it from judging with candour and precision."¹¹ This idea appears to be at the root of all of Smollett's novels and resolves the problem individual man must face: that being exposed to the conflicting demands of what is at best a neutral society, what ethical expedient can insure both public and private happiness? The passage above is important as a statement of Smollett's most vital realization of the organic fusion of ethic and form, and *Humphry Clinker* is important as the achievement of that realization.

¹⁰ *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, I, 137.

¹¹ *Humphry Clinker* (London, 1954), p. 330.

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This idea, in fact, provides a fundamental criterion for distinguishing Smollett's pen from that of Thomas Francklin or John Armstrong in a given review. Francklin particularly adhered rigidly to Protestantism and rejected "enthusiasm" of any kind. In *Peregrine Pickle*, however, Smollett discredits Francklin's own brand of "enthusiasm":

Though our young gentleman differed widely from them in point of political principles, he was not one of those enthusiasts who look upon every schism from the established articles of faith, as damnable, and exclude the sceptick from every benefit of humanity and christian forgiveness: he could easily comprehend how a man of the most unblemished morals might, by the prejudice of education, or indispensable attachments, be engaged in such a blameworthy and pernicious undertaking; and thought that they had already suffered severely for their imprudence.¹²

If in practice Smollett only partially succeeded in reconciling the shafts of his satire with the texture of the novel's total effect, he did conceive of the novel as a genre characterized by its form, a form which succeeded as both an aesthetic and ethical vehicle in terms of its imaginative impact through sympathetic response. Within this framework Smollett attempted to dramatize the conflict between human nature and social awareness and to awaken in the reader a realization of his own humanity in terms of a common humanity.

The first clear statement of the *Critical Review's* attitude toward the nature and function of fiction is found in the review of Dr. Johnson's *Rasselas* in 1759. The two vital ideas in this review are that fiction must "convey knowledge by insensible steps" (a phrase that recalls Lord Kames's "ideal presence" and that emphasizes the relationship between structure and imaginative response) and that the author who employs his pen on moral subjects "free from limited systems, narrow prejudices and subtle disquisitions, cultivates a science of all others most conducive to private content and public utility," which is, of course, the tangible product of that crucial union of the selfish and social passions.¹³ The reviewer implies that a natural series of events that rises "easily from the subject . . . without breaking the thread of the narrative" will delight the reader aesthetically in terms of its coherence and ethically in terms of imaginatively evoking our sympathy in favor of the well-being of a common humanity. Again the reviewer discusses the concept of probability in fiction not in terms of characters who are "true to nature" but rather in terms of the reader's response to the entire texture of the work. Morality, he argued, could be

¹² p. 195.

¹³ *CR*, VII (April 1759), 372.

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taught through a structurally vivid presentation rather than through intellectual delineation; as a result the presentation would appeal to the imagination rather than to logic.

The reviewer of *A Description of Millenium Hall* also stressed that the author's imaginative appeal to both the aesthetic and the moral senses would unify the novel. "Morality conveyed in fiction," the reviewer argues, "requires all the powers of the imagination to render it palatable. . . . A writer of romance, to answer the purpose of this species of writing, ought eminently to possess the faculty of pleasing by an exertion of the powers of the imagination; a fruitful invention and a profound knowledge of the human heart."¹⁴

The *Critical Review* writers invariably associated structure with sympathetic rapport. In his review of *The Supposed Daughter* Derrick wrote: "Our author seems to have been a stranger both to order and the art of touching the passions. . . ."¹⁵ And the reviewer of Elizabeth and Richard Griffith's *A Series of Genuine Letters between Henry and Frances* commented: ". . . it would have been more useful had those reflections been methodized; and more entertaining, had the strokes of private history been such as could have interested the passions of the reader."¹⁶ The reviewer of *The History of Wilhelmina Susannah Dormer* emphasized that vivid and credible characters effectively governed the plot by evoking the reader's sympathy: "However, while the plot, thus morally conducted, aims at pleasing the judgment, perhaps it fails of captivating our affections. . . . We esteem the characters, without being solicitous about their success; and we find them happy in the conclusion without sympathizing in the event."¹⁷

The *Critical Review* was aware not only of the demands of the novel as a separate literary genre but also of the demands of the modes within the genre. The reviewer of Frances Sheridan's *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* commended the author's use of the epistolary technique and distinguished the novel from the drama by citing the difficulty of achieving an intense structural unity within the broad framework of the novel. The reviewer does, however, recognize the possibility of the epistolary form to sustain emotion naturally through the immediacy of sentiment.¹⁸ The review of *The Peregrinations of*

¹⁴ CR, XIV (December 1762), 463.

¹⁵ CR, I (April 1756), 260.

¹⁶ CR, III (May 1757), 432.

¹⁷ CR, VII (January 1759), 67-8.

¹⁸ CR, XI (March 1761), 186-198.

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Jeremiah Grant also distinguished the novel from the drama in terms of its structural possibilities. In this review Smollett's hand is clearly evident. Indeed, the review is particularly striking in its verbal and analogical parallels to Smollett's preface to *Ferdinand Count Fathom*. Smollett writes in the preface:

A novel is a large diffused picture, comprehending the characters of life, disposed in different groups, and exhibited in various attitudes, for the purposes of a uniform plan, and general occurrence, to which every individual figure is subservient. But this plan cannot be executed with propriety or success, without a principal personage to attract the attention, unite the incidents, unwind the clue of the labyrinth, and at last close the scene by virtue of his own importance.¹⁹

And the reviewer argues:

This kind of romance is a diffused comedy unrestrained by the rules of the drama, comprehending a great variety of incident and character, referring however, to one principle action and one particular personage, whose importance must not only engage our attention and esteem, but also unite the whole concatenation of scenes and adventures. He must still maintain his dignity, like the chief figure in the foreground in a picture; and the author, as the painter, must take care to preserve a "keeping" in his performance; that is, all the other characters shall be in some measure subservient to the principal, and kept from advancing forwards so far as to rival the chief of the drama, in the attention of the reader.²⁰

I have already suggested that human nature for Smollett contained a natural potentiality for sympathy toward humanity if it remained undefiled by the prejudices of self or socially imposed ethical strictures. Jerry Melford remarks: "... What absurd judgments we form in viewing objects through the falsifying mediums of prejudice and passion."²¹ The *Critical Review* reflected the same sentiment. The reviewer of Charles Johnstone's *Chrysal, or The Adventures of a Guinea* commented: "Traffic's character convinces us that he [Johnstone] is capable of high colouring; but we are shocked by the enormity of his crimes, so monstrous and disgraceful to the human species. The picture of the Jesuits is strong, but as it exceeds what the utmost villany can effect, the satyrist loses his aim. In a word, we hope for the sake of humanity, that the writer has beheld nature reflected by a false mirror."²²

¹⁹ I, 4.

²⁰ CR, XV (January 1763), 13.

²¹ *Humphry Clinker*, p. 330.

²² CR, IX (May 1760), 419.

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The reviewer's attitude toward human nature and particularly his remark on the depiction of the Jesuits indicate Smollett's hand. In fact, this is the first review of a novel that underplays and criticizes the verbal attack on the Jesuit order. Though Smollett pokes fun at the priest in *Roderick Random* and the Capuchin in *Peregrine Pickle*, his attitude toward religious prejudice and human nature is voiced by his most admirable and knowledgeable characters. Don Diego, for example, anticipates Melford's above remark: ". . . I am fully satisfied that real goodness is of no particular persuasion, and that salvation cannot depend upon belief, over which the will has no influence."²³ The phrase "real goodness is of no particular persuasion" finds its political counterpart in *Sir Launcelot Greaves*, where Smollett argues that "true patriotism is of no party."²⁴ For all of Smollett's sallies on priests, his remarks on the *abbés* serve as a general rule for his satire: "These worthy sons of every community shall always be sacred from my censure and ridicule; and while I laugh at the folly of particular members, I can still honor and revere the institution."²⁵

The review of Johnstone's *The Reverie, or The Flight to the Paradise of Fools* provides the most concise statement on human nature in terms of the satirist's role of inspiring the reader with "a contempt for individuals, without diminishing his respect for the species."²⁶ The review reiterates sentiments expressed in that of *Chrysal* and in Smollett's preface to *Roderick Random*, and more importantly it emphasizes that the reader must be presented with that which is admirable in humanity and his sensibility directed to whatever is beautiful in moral conduct. Smollett balanced Fathom with Count Melvil to achieve this end, and even Greaves, whose satiric barbs were leveled against a malicious society, remarked to Aurelia that his services have been "rather the duties of common humanity."

The *Critical Review's* attitude toward human nature is again reflected in its comments on party prejudice and religious hypocrisy. The review of Charlotte Lennox's *Henrietta* contains the following comment: "Tho' the reputation of Henrietta is chiefly founded on her steady adherence to the principles of the Protestant religion; that preference is given with a delicacy, that not the most bigotted Roman-Catholic could be offended at; the heroine no where betrays the rude-

²³ *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, II, 283.

²⁴ Shakespeare Head Edition (Oxford, 1926), p. 96.

²⁵ *Ferdinand Count Fathom*, I, 160-161.

²⁶ CR, XIV (December 1762), 440.

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ness of party, or the malevolence of religious attachment."²⁷ Both Smollett and the *Critical Review* shared an impartial political policy between 1756 and 1763. In fact one of Smollett's qualifications for managing the *Briton* in 1762 was his freedom from party affiliation.

One of the *Critical's* most revealing commentaries on the novel is its lengthy review of Rousseau's *Eloisa*.²⁸ The reviewer displays a liberality in condoning Rousseau's style, yet he does not neglect to emphasize the dramatic function of form in illustrating the aesthetic principles to which the *Critical Review* adhered in its treatment of the genre. The review is built on an extensive comparison between Rousseau and Samuel Richardson, whom the magazine held in high regard. The reviewer acknowledges the necessity of both ideal presence for emotional response through association of ideas and the delineation of human nature as intrinsically beneficent and worthy of esteem and sympathy. It is noteworthy that the reviewer acknowledges not only that the relation between structure and response to character can be realized in terms of the psychological veracity of the character within the total design of the novel but also that they are indissoluble in terms of their imaginative organization. The reviewer writes that

Richardson unfolds his characters by a variety of slight touches and circumstances, which appear trivial unless you regard his design; while Rousseau, by a felicity of genius, lays naked the heart at a single stroke, and interests you in the fate of his personages, before you can be said to know them. By a simple motion of his pen, the whole group is assembled in the imagination, and engages the attention in porportion as they are connected with Eloisa.

He clearly argues in terms of a psychological foundation for the genre. The author's genius imaginatively creates a heroine who governs the structure of the novel by her psychological veracity as a human being and who can thus evoke the reader's emotional response to her cause. The reviewer adds, however, that although the impression is strong, "it is evanescent; like the fleeting pictures of a dream. They strongly agitate for a time, and are afterwards forgot; while those of Richardson imprint the mind more durably, because the stroke is more frequently reiterated." He argues here in terms of associational response. Images called up to engage the passions must be strong; they affect the memory and direct the reader's attention away from the formal presentation or other extraneous attractions not germane to the organic texture of the work. The reviewer remarks, in fact, that Richardson's "stroke" is

²⁷ CR, V (February 1758), 130.

²⁸ CR, XII (September 1761), 203-211.

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reiterated through "strong *ideas which arise by association*" (my italics), while Rousseau's ideas "flash like lightning, illuminate every surrounding object . . . and [are] scarce deducible from what preceded, or the subject in question." Smollett affirmed the aesthetic efficacy of associational response in his review of Fulke and Francis Greville's *Maxims, Characters, and Reflections* when he wrote: "We are rationally delighted with those objects on account of the association of ideas which they produce."²⁹

The *Critical Review's* piece on *Eloisa* is particularly revealing. The reviewer commends a work "without a single interesting event," though one in which "we are deeply engaged in every situation, and are equally delighted with the narrative of the historian and the lectures of the philosopher," because the author's genius is "incapable of speaking or thinking in the common beaten track." This review is ample evidence of the periodical's concern with the novel as a serious genre that could operate effectively within a given critical framework. It is a concern that anticipates the end of the century in its defense of sentiment and feeling.

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* C.R. I (March 1756), 221.